Cynical Soundings: the Dappled World of the Dog's Bark

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By Matthew Battles (associate director, metaLAB (at) Harvard)

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ABSTRACT

Ethologists like Ray and Lorna Coppinger describe the dog's bark as an "emergent" behavioral phenomenon (2015), its variety and richness reducible to a few algorithmic, determinative rules. But when I listen to my daughter howling with the one-year-old mixed-breed puppy that lives in our house, a different set of rules, and soundings, seems to be in play. Indeed, the barking of the dog creates sound worlds of richness and variety. The determinative rules sought by classical ethology are efficacious here, albeit in dappled states (Cartwright 1999), ramifying and resonant, imbricated in realms of sensory, affective, and semiotic intensity. In the everyday, the bark of the dog registers a spectrum from alarm to the absurd—yet we also recognize in its timbres the sounding power of the Cynic, embodied classically by the "dog-man" Diogenes, whose critiques made virtues of humility and abjection. Recent popular accounts of dog behavior weave together discourses from genetics, behavioral ecology, paleontology, evolutionary psychology, and public health—and yet beyond these, the dog's bark resonates in a dark abundance of critterly relations that make the dog what Donna Haraway (2003) describes as our "partner in the crime of human evolution." This paper will explore and situate some of the shifting sonorities (Bonnet 2012) created by the vocalizations of *Canis familiaris*, the domestic dog, as it mingles in human institutions. The presentation was accompanied by excerpts from audio recordings exploring affective and expressive dimensions of canid-human acoustic ecology, charting some of the ways in which the dog's bark sounds human and nonhuman worlds.

> *A man and a woman*
> *Are one.*
> *A man and a woman and a blackbird*
> *Are one.* —Stevens, "Thirteen Ways of Looking At a Blackbird"

This project begins for me on a personal note: to be specific, a recording of a canine-human duet wavering tremulously around G# in the diatonic scale. My daughter, 18 years old at the time of this recording, utters a howl in presence of Nala, our pet Carolina Dog—whom we "rescued," in the parlance of virtuous bourgeois canophilia—herself 18 months old at the time of the recording. After a couple of repetitions, a responsive utterance rises in Nala's throat: first a murmuring growl, low and suppressed, and then the blossoming howl in key. Nala's brow furrows, her tail goes

springy and erect as a drawn bow, and the howls come in waves. Judith and Nala's utterances don't complement each other dialogically, but seem rather sympathetic, resonant, more wind and wave than call and response.

I've become intrigued by the extent to which canine and human soundworlds touch and overlap, while charting different and mutually incommunicable territories as well. Of course, versions of this observation circulate readily in popular discourse about dog behavior; we're all vaguely aware of how much "better" the dog's audition is—keener, subtler, wider in spectrum and more precise in locative power. But the more time I spent with Nala, the more I found myself dissatisfied with this framing. The richness of our auditory entanglement and co-creation seems of a piece with the degree of our differences.

In its everyday eruptions, the bark of the dog measures a spectrum from alarm to the absurd. Popular accounts of dog behavior weave together discourses from genetics, behavioral ecology, paleontology, evolutionary psychology, and public health. It can seem as if it's dogs all the way down: dogs as our companions out of some paleolithic Eden, connecting us to a wild we wish into existence by reclaiming what we push away; dogs as test subjects, astronauts in behaviorist expeditions to remote worlds of functionalist stimulus and response; dogs as avatars for behavioral virtues in the pop-animal discourses of training, suburban ethics, and veterinary reality television—a mapping made richly by Donna Haraway in *Companion Species Manifesto* and *When Species Meet*.

And yet beyond these, the dog's bark not only erupts, but irrupts—crashes in on us, a rupture and a rapture of affect, a clangor of resonant critterly relations exceeding explanation. What do we do with these energies, these *topoi*, these islands of attention in swirling seas? In her recent essay "In the World That Affect Proposed," Kathleen Stewart notes that "[a]nalytic attention to the forms and forces of moving bodies and events invites experiments with description and with the conceptual…. (this is) a mode of thought that takes place in what Isabelle Stengers (Stengers, Massumi, and Manning 2009) calls the *mezzo*—the state of being in the middle of attachments and threats, of what lingers and what jumps. This is a method that tries to move in the manner of things slipping in and out of existence."

This *mezzo* is no void; for all its liminality, it is crepuscular, vivid, and it resounds with echoes and tintinnabulations, with barks and howls. To be nimble in this resonant *mezzo*—to keep our ears pricked for the sonorous, and not merely to catch the audible—is to exercise a wariness. We could do worse than to take Donna Haraway's imprecation as our watchword: "Dogs are not an alibi for other themes," Haraway writes in *Companion Species Manifesto*; "dogs are fleshly material-semiotic presences in the body of technoscience. Dogs are not just surrogates for theory; they are not here just to think with. Partners in the crime of human evolution, they are in the garden from the get-go, wily as Coyote."

With Haraway, I want to remain wily—cynical, perhaps, in the sense of the Cynic Diogenes, who reputedly lived in a tub and raged in the streets of Athens. The term "cynicism" derives from the Greek κύων (dog), and κυνικός or "dog-like." To their neighbors in the Hellenic Roman world, the cynics seemed doglike—a dogginess, however, at a remote, a neglected but perhaps not unfamiliar province in the realm of the western companion canine. For even among our companion dogs and emotional-support animals, a contemporary armamentarium of doggy descriptors ranging from the infantile to the therapeutic, we likely all can recollect mangy, thin, cockeyed creatures—street dogs, "junkyard dogs," "strays"—who nonetheless exhibit an aspect of absorbed and emancipated attention. This condition of privileged abjection might closely approximate to the estate of the dog in the world.

My purpose here is not solely to investigate cultural attitudes to the canine, but to ask how canine-human relations exceed or overspill the normative categories that pattern interspecies subjectivities, emergent and abundant. How they flood the *mezzo*, sonorously, washing at islands of analytic attention.

> *When the blackbird flew out of sight,*
> *It marked the edge*
> *Of one of many circles.*
> —Stevens, "Thirteen Ways"

DOGS OF LESBSOS

The opportunity to ponder cynical affect in transposition came about for me recently, during a short and intensive field trip to Mytilini on the Greek island of Lesbos in May 2017. I was there to

offer a workshop in sound mapping with an NGO called the Office for Displaced Designers, which works with displaced people resident in the two camps on Lesbos, Moria and Kara Tepe. Workshop participants—students or skilled designers and engineers from the camps and the local community—learned audio recording and production while exploring together the sound worlds Lesbos offers. And so too we recorded dogs; for dogs are ubiquitous in Mytilini. Feral and unowned, they lounge amidst the feet of walkers in the market, lie zonked out in cafes with their legs akimbo, heads sheltered by chairs. They comprise a crazy-quilt of indistinct breeds, variously sized, some spotted and some solid-colored, most midsize dogs with dented, wiry hair in colors ranging from cinnamon to chocolate to spoiled milk.

And dogs are general throughout the Mytilini conurbation. In the village of Taxiarches, where my rented house nestled at the foot of a wind-washed promontory overlooking the narrow strait and the rolling Turkish shore beyond, the dogs also lounged and patrolled, in assemblies loosely tied to house and neighborhood. Clambering up and down the steep alleys of grooved pavement gathering a labyrinth of houses and tavernas into the embrace of the parish church, one might round a tight corner beneath a fenced-in porch to be greeted by an explosion of barks from on high.

What do we have in these recordings, these barks and yips and growls? Throughout, there is a rhythmic drive, a pulse—the rumor of an ideal form lurking amidst the varied twice- and thrice-uttered barks; even (though I use the word thickly) a kind of music. Or rather, these things arise in me, buoyed by a patterned pulse of affect. Meanwhile, amid the steep terraced roofscape of the hillside suburb of Taxiarches, and in the backyards and lots carpeting the littoral below, distant barks bloom here and there in the morning still. Arise in response? Perhaps. And yet as expressive in response, as dappled, as my own cynical musicology.

What is the bark, precisely, as utterance, as marker, as lens of affect? It's a question that can prompt all manner of para-, peri-, allo, and pseudo-scientific speculation. "Household dogs are often restricted in their movement," the Coppingers write (in *How Dogs Work*); as a consequence, "they are likely to be motivationally conflicted." The Coppingers thus characterize the bark behavorially as a compound utterance, combining the tonal call of appeasement or appeal (the howl my daughter and Nala elicit from each other) with the rough, guttural signal, common among canids, of warning or aggression. Wolves, the Coppingers state, bark exceedingly rarely; they are

likeliest to do so when their movement is constrained or their social status relative to the stimulus uncertain.

The Coppingers' explanations are founded on a basis of strict empirical observation. And yet that basis, of course, is already structured, already laced with affect. There's something about the poetics at work in this characterization of the bark that that bears the influence of the image of the domestic animal as some kind of ontological hybrid of tame and wild—a creature caught betwixt and between. And this image is both marked and exceeded, overspilled, by the convulsing figure of the dog, and the flood, the iiruption, of its bark.

Brian Massumi, invoking Deleuze and Guattari: "It is the mark that makes the territory." For present purposes, it is the *bark* that makes the territory. But *contra* normative assumptions, this is not to say that the bark is simply *territorial*; to say such would be to "fall prey to the commonplace assumption that what is in play preexists as an already constituted subject, in functional interaction with similarly preconstituted objects in a preplotted spatial frame…." (Massumi again). "(T)he frame is always exceeded in lived abstraction. The performance of the expressive act sets in motion the surpassing space of its own operation… The subject is always ahead of itself in the movement of expression" (96). The bark resonates acousmatically, out of sight and beyond any locatable territorial precinct, annunciating not merely its territory, but territoriality as such.

The dark abundance of this archipelagic *mezzo*, this always-already exceeded territoriality, brings to mind another audio sample from Greece. This sample was recorded during a protest action in Mytilini, when some hundred or so anti-austerity activists lined up to march to city hall along the harborside corniche. The leaders used bullhorns to lead the marchers in several chants, the most prominent of which went, "no more injustice, traitors of the people, take your *mnimonio* (MOU—the slang for the arrangements with the EU and IMF) and get out of here." Amidst the slogans, however, the canine soundmark is intermingled.

The dogs participating in the strike march, four or five in number, were clearly eager to be moving in a throng of people, walking with canine confidence amid the crowd. A crucial dynamic complicates this soundscape, however, one not apparent in the recording: as dogs worked their way to the head of the march, they would break away to chase cars in the oncoming lanes of the boulevard—barking madly—only to re-join the parade when they reached its end. Their barking

mingled with the bullhorn blaring chants and imprecations, creating a soundscape at once intensely political and agonistic and spilling over into the beyond-political as well.

Watching protest unfold in the streets of an ancient Greek town, it might be too easy to invoke again the philosophical school of cynicism. Diogenes' cynicism is closer to the condition of the dog in the streets and byways of Lesbos, perhaps, than anything seen in American streets and backyards (a cynical dog park is difficult to imagine). But even this characterization is only partial, and I would utter it only *sotto voce*—a glotta growl rather than a full-throated bark.

SOUNDING, CYNICAL

In *How Forests Think*, Eduardo Kohn describes the striving of Runa villagers to interpret their dogs' barks as they sound in the forest—to frame and fathom these voicings as they shift from joy to mortal fear. According to Kohn, the Runa also strive to interpret their dogs' dreams, even feeding them hallucinogenic substances in hopes of inducing the dogs to come to them in dreams of their own. To situate human-dog relations—indeed all interspecific relationships—Kohn turns to the semiotics of Charles S. Peirce. This is a semiotics not restricted to human worlds, but distributed across the biologic spectrum: for Peirce, meaning-making modes of iconicity and indexicality are shared by creatures of all kinds, and selves are the entities that emerge in the matrix of signs responding to signs in the world. The world thus is broadly selved in a flood of meaning and affect.

Taking up this perspective in his ethnographic encounter with the Runa and their dogs, Kohn concludes that, while perfect intersubjectivity is never possible, selves nonetheless are continually coming into being in chains of meaning and affect, continually striving to share meaning and understand one another across species. One doesn't need perfect congruence between self and other to achieve understanding—indeed, selves are never even perfectly self-congruent in time. We understand one another nonetheless; never perfectly but always, inescapably, partially. For Kohn, this Peircean perspective serves as rejoinder to the perspective offered by Thomas Nagel, for whom the consciousness of a bat is an unreachable *umwelt*; or Wittgenstein, who concluded famously that "if the lion could speak, we should not understand him." But as Kohn evocatively documents, the Runa are capable of understanding, and being understood by, not only their dogs, but myriad creatures—indeed, by the forest itself.

I want to say that this region of interspecific semiosis is the very *mezzo* limned by Stengers.

Kohn argues that, with its vast biodiversity, the tropical forest makes an ideal case for a trans-species Peircean analysis, producing a *mezzo* resonant with crashes and cries. And yet we needn't travel to the Amazon watershed to find such a *mezzo*; for we inhabit it along with our dogs already. And they're there with us. The selves that are dogs tune flexibly into human semiosis across the full spectrum of sociality. To the Runa, they're powerful dreamers; on Lesbos, they're energetic neighbors and measurers of human political affect. In the 21st-century West, we make them into surrogate children and emotional-support workers, companions with a host of other possibilities. But this short list doesn't come close to illuminating the dark abundance of cynical possibility, of canine comment on anthropogenic meanings.

And what do they make of us, meanwhile? This question is perhaps the most salient. Because dogs have evolved nothing more finely than the capacity to interpret, respond, to, and make use of human semiosis. They make us littermates and lifemates, friends and enemies. To the dog we can be storm or sunny day, playmate or nemesis, hunting companion or inexhaustible source of fresh forage. The dog has been many things to humans, and the catalogue has not been exhausted. But among all these possibilities, one conclusion emerges over all: the dog is an anthropologist.

The global population of dogs has been estimated at roughly one billion–and of these, the Coppingers observe, some 750 million live as feral dogs, street dogs, pariahs. Human valences of those canine conditions vary across time and place, to be sure. On Lesbos, the dog is more than tolerated; individual canines shift easily along a spectrum from pet to pariah. In much of North America, by contrast, the street dog doesn't exist as a category—for the "stray" is not a street dog, but a pet in a state of exception.

These shadings have their clear connections to human cultural matrices. And yet the contribution of the dog to its own colorations could be better acknowledged and appreciated….

"Do not presume you have access to a criterion for categorically separating the human from the animal," Massumi writes (in *What Animals Teach Us About Politics*); and "(d)o not mistake creativity for a diversion of instinct into symbolic realms…. This is little better than the opposite approach of containing expression in the constraining frames of function and adaptation. Either way, creativity is reduced to an epiphenomenon, and the style and grace of its expressive something-extras are

reduced to superfluity and ornamentation" (91). So while we do recognize here the sounding power of the cynic, the mingled timbres of absurdity, humility, and abjection, there is a unique, critterly comity and intensity of affect, too, which belongs to *Canis familiaris* and the worlds it makes with us.

We find here, perhaps, a kind of sonic "meshwork," to transpose Ingold's concept (2011)—not a rigid structure (nor two structures merely interposed), but an interweaving of conditions of expressive, affective, and political possibility. This mesh is the gossamer of the *mezzo*, the semiotic fluid register of the sonorous archipelago, a tidal fabric weaving and tumbling amid resonant insularities. It's a choral clamor vivifying Bonnet's distinction of the sonorous and the audible—the sonorous being that which sounds, which resounds in affect, whether we actively *listen* or not. We—canine and human—in the clamor of our mutual inaudibilities, together are ever discovering and navigating a sonorous archipelago, a *mezzo* of semiogenic selves—insularities that are always partial and shifting, washed by one ocean of sense, meaning, and affect. None of which is to say that sound is a necessary component of the mezzo, without which no trans-specific selving would take place. Only that sound, with its entanglement in intention and affect—its force in sonorous and audible modes—offers a distinctive realm in which semiosis moves.

Pace Massumi, we're inclined to map certain sensory and affective textures to place: to home and hearth, neighborhood, or Aegean harborside. Tim Ingold cautions us against reifying such mappings. "We may, in practice, be anchored to the ground," Ingold remarks, "but it is not light, sound, or feeling that holds us down. On the contrary, they contrive to sweep us off our feet." We are never passive vessels for sensory phenomena. And yet nor do we conjure them wholly out of thin air, as it were. It's rather as though we were motes afloat in sound, in light, "enlightened, ensounded"—and expressive in the swerves we make thereby. Expressive, and responsive: Ingold illustrates his point with an ethnographic anecdote from Nicole Revel's account of kite-flying among the Palawan people of the Philippines who, identifying kites with birds, sense in the tension and thrum of kite strings the turbulent tug of wind in the feathers of wings. What analogous conduction of affect might we feel through the sounding of the dog? Does it not take the form—one form, *inter alia ad infinitum*—of a resounding howl in matched pitches, an intertwining of canine and human affect? To situate this knowledge is to embrace the dark abundance of canine, and human, otherness—a *mezzo* found neither in a Jack London-esque wild wont, nor in the cozy

confines of the pet paradigm, but in the overspilling alterity of affect and sonority, in the cynical sounding of the dog.

> *I know noble accents*
> *And lucid, inescapable rhythms;*
> *But I know, too,*
> *That the blackbird is involved*
> *In what I know.* —Stevens, "Thirteen Ways"

APPENDIX: SOUND FILES

Sound 1
Sound 2
Sound 3

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